3.0 Assessment of Significance

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

D Significant door
C Significant chimneypiece

Significance - Basement Level - 1 of 2

Alan Baxter
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

Significant door
Significant chimney piece
Significance - Ground Floor - 2 of 2

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

Significant door
Significant chimneypiece
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

D Significant door
C Significant chimney piece
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Significance - 1st Floor - 2 of 2

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

D Significant door
C Significant chimney piece
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

D Significant door
C Significant chimney piece
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Significance - 2nd Floor - 2 of 2

Alan Baxter
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Significance - 3rd Floor - 1 of 2

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract
Significant door
Significant chimneypiece
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract

D Significant door
C Significant chimney piece

Significance - 3rd Floor - 2 of 2
Significance - Roof Level - 1 of 2
3.0 Assessment of Significance
3.0 Assessment of Significance

Significance - Welcome Wolfson Building

Medium significance
Moderate significance
Neutral
Alterations detract
Significant door
Significant chimneypiece

Third Floor  Fourth Floor  Fifth Floor  Roof
Lower Ground Floor  Ground Floor  Upper Ground  First Floor  Second Floor
East Block at first-floor level, c. 1920s, showing the sailing ships gallery (SMG collection)
4.0 Risks, Opportunities and Guidelines

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the ways in which the significance of the different elements of the site described in Chapter 3 is vulnerable, and to explore opportunities for enhancing the site’s special qualities.

The themes considered here have emerged from the analysis outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, and from discussions with the Museum’s staff, including the Masterplanning Committee. This Conservation Plan is designed to inform an emerging masterplan. Therefore, the headings begin with matters that are priorities in the context of the Guidelines.

4.2 Implementing the Plan

Risks

The Plan’s Guidelines should be formally adopted by the Museum. The document needs an ‘owner’ with responsibility to see that its Guidelines are implemented. The appropriate person is the Director of Estates. The Plan will also need to be reviewed at intervals of no more than 5 years, so that it reflects new information and developments and changes in conservation guidelines and guidance.

Guidelines

1. The Science Museum will review this Conservation Plan every 5 years.
2. The Director of Estates will be responsible for seeing that the guidelines in this Plan are followed by the Museum, its staff, consultants and contractors.

4.3 Designation

Background

It comes as a surprise to many that, despite their architectural and historic interest, neither the Science Museum building nor the Post Office block are listed (though they are both protected to the extent that they are in a conservation area). Listed buildings are defined by statute as buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Essentially, this means that they have been judged to be of national importance. English Heritage publishes listing selection guidance that sets out the criteria for listing. English Heritage has also recently (2012) published guidance clarifying the circumstances in which it will accept applications for designation. These are where the building:

a) is demonstrably under serious threat of demolition or major alteration
b) falls within an area which is a strategic priority under the National Heritage Protection Plan (e.g. public libraries, Cold War, etc.) and which has been identified for designation follow-up
c) possesses evident significance, and is obviously worthy of inclusion on the National Heritage List for England

With regard to point (b), National Museums are not included in the National Heritage Protection Plan; Post Offices are considered at risk (section 4A4), but the relevant ‘Activity Programme’ of research, assessment and designation makes no mention of them.

Science Museum building

The special interest, in listing terms, of the Museum itself is not clear cut. The main façade is undoubtedly impressive, but the interiors generally fall short of the quality of the Post Office interiors. The comparative analysis of interwar museums and galleries in chapter 3 puts the architectural interest of the East Block in context. The later phases are of less interest and certainly do not warrant listing in their own right.

On the other hand, (a) the East Block is of constructional interest for its relatively early and successful use of reinforced concrete on a large scale, and (b) the relevant English Heritage ‘Listing Selection Guide’ places emphasis on the importance of Group Value in assessing museums:

‘The selection criteria for museums and art galleries centre around architectural quality; decorative enrichment; degree of alteration; artistic interest and group value. Like libraries, they often form part of a civic group – not necessarily all of it coeval – and their contribution to this may strengthen the case for designation. Grandeur and patronage (whether civic or privately endowed) are key elements.’ Designation Listing Selection Guide: Culture and Entertainment, English Heritage, 2011.

The Science Museum is part of a civic group of national and, indeed, international importance. Therefore it may well meet the criteria for listing. However, it does not appear to meet English Heritage’s three criteria for the assessment quoted above.

Post Office Block

Based on extensive research of Post Office architecture for English Heritage, it is the authors’ opinion that the Post Office Block does meet the listing criteria. It is a handsome example of a style of Post Office typical of the period. What elevates it above the norm is the richness of architectural embellishment and the architectural quality, state of preservation and historical interest of the Met Office interiors. Moreover, post offices are identified as a priority in the National Heritage Protection Plan, and therefore the building meets English Heritage’s requirements to initiate a listing assessment.
Impact of Listing
Modern listings are often made with precise delineation of what is significant and what is not. A good example is the former United States Embassy in Grosvenor Square (1957-60; Grade II), whose list description unambiguously identifies the ‘special interest’ of the building as confined to the façades and a few public rooms. The rest is identified as being of no interest, and by inference could be remodelled uncontentiously and without the need necessarily to apply for listed building consent. A similar approach might be adopted if the Science Museum were listed.

Heritage Partnership Agreement
If either of the buildings were listed, the Museum should consider a Heritage Partnership Agreement. In its most effective form this is a very simple document, agreeing between the building owner, the local authority and English Heritage what works would require consent and what do not. For example, at the Museum it may be possible to agree that internal works to much of the museum as confined to the façades and a few public rooms. The rest is identified as being of no interest, and by inference could be remodelled uncontentiously and without the need necessarily to apply for listed building consent. A similar approach might be adopted if the Science Museum were listed.

4.4 Post Office Block
Opportunities
The Post Office Block is owned by the Science Museum, which leases the basement and parts of the ground floor to Royal Mail. Because the lease expires in 2014, there is an opportunity to consider the use of the whole building in relation to the needs of the Science Museum, now and in the future.

The Post Office Block is strategically important because it has an extensive public frontage on two roads, and because part of its ground floor falls within the footprint of the Museum. The Masterplan currently under development therefore proposes incorporating part of the ground floor into the Museum in order to improve access and circulation.

Although the Post Office Block is not listed, it is significant for its rich architectural treatment and for its associations with the Meteorological Office. However, there are large areas, including the ground-floor sorting office, that are of comparatively low significance and could be adapted without substantial harm to overall significance.

Risks
Historically, the institutions of Albertopolis have benefitted from periodic adjustments in the uses of individual buildings and sites, which has been possible due to the security of the freeholds (see illustrations, pp. 5-6). If the freehold of the Post Office Block were sold, there is a risk that the site would be needed for the Museum in the future.

Because of the significance of the Post Office Block, it could become designated as a listed building (see section 4.3). If so, alterations to the building would be subject to listed building consent, which may constrain design options and uses.

Guidelines
3. The Museum will seek to exploit the positive architectural qualities of the Post Office Block in its future use and development.

4.5 Relationship with Surroundings
Linked institutions
Fundamental to the concept of Albertopolis was the idea of a network of integrated institutions. The close proximity of museums and colleges was intended to facilitate education and research through the cross-fertilisation of ideas and experience. These relationships became physically manifest, e.g. by bridges linking the Science Museum to the Royal College of Science and also to the Natural History Museum (see diagram, p. 65).

The bridges were present by the 1960s but the last was closed to the public circa 1996 when the two museums started charging for entry, in order to protect revenue. However, both museums now have free entry once again. A major impediment to reopening the bridges has therefore been removed. Unfortunately, the Natural History Museum has since made alterations on their side of the bridge, separating it from the public areas of the museum.

Nevertheless, the Science Museum should continue to explore opportunities to reinstate these links with its sister organisation.

- This would encourage visitors to explore the links between the sciences, in the spirit of the founders of Albertopolis.
- As discussed in section 4.6, the Museum has an axial circulation with only one main entrance. Re-establishing the links to the Natural History Museum would enable visitors to take a circuit around the institutions.
- The Natural History Museum attracts more visitors than the Science Museum because it occupies a better ‘pitch’, nearer the Tube station and with a grand elevation to Cromwell Road. Reopening the bridge link might therefore increase visitor numbers to the Science Museum.

Exhibition Road
The Exhibition Road public realm scheme, completed 2012, has transformed the setting of the Science Museum and the public’s approach to it. It has encouraged the V & A to press ahead with its plan for a new entrance on the ‘boiler house’ site opposite the Science Museum. This will change the way visitors circulate around South Kensington.
The Science Museum works with its sister organisations, local residents and the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea to explore ways in which the transformation of Exhibition Road could be continued in ways that respect the interests of all. This is to be encouraged, because the change of the Road from a traffic thoroughfare to a pedestrian boulevard enhances the setting of the Science Museum and its cultural mission.

When considering the continuing evolution of the relationship between the Museum and Exhibition Road, the Museum should respect and celebrate the stature of its principal elevation. This façade is the Science Museum’s public face and a virtually unaltered example of interwar classical grandeur. It was superbly restored in 2012 in time for the Exhibition Road improvements. Any future alterations would need to be undertaken with great tact and feeling for the elevation’s architectural form, in order to conserve its detail, rhythm and articulation.

Queen’s Gate
As originally envisaged, the Museum was to have another entrance on Queen’s Gate, terminating the internal axis. This is shown on Office of Works drawings of 1914 and 1928 (see p. 13 and 15). An entrance on Queen’s Gate is therefore the last unrealised element of the original masterplan.

Guidelines
4. The Science Museum will continue to explore opportunities to reinstate physical links to the Natural History Museum, through dialogue with its sister institution.